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ABSTRACT

This booklet is part of a series of seven booklets designed to introduce aspects of effective reading instruction that should be considered when teaching reading to students with disabilities. It focuses on essential skill building and teaching activities related to developing a child's use of phonics, or the ability to use the sounds of letters and letter groups to read words they do not know. Methods of teaching reading to students with disabilities described have been shown to be particularly effective. An introduction discusses general principles for teaching reading to students with disabilities and emphasizes the importance of individually designing a program based on a student's strengths and needs, parent involvement, and academic modifications. Information is organized into the following sections: what systematic phonics instruction is, why it is important, what parents can do, what teachers can do, information for second language learners, and resources. Strategies include making sure the child's Individualized Education Program specifically addresses the need for systematic phonics instruction, making letter books, reading A-B-C books, having the child sound out a word, and teaching sounds of letters and of letter groups directly. (Contains 12 references.) (CR)

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PEER Literacy Resource Brief #2

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"Systematic Phonics Instruction"

from

Teaching Students with Disabilities to Read

by Carolyn A. Denton
Jan E. Hasbrouck
Texas A&M University

Prepared by
the PEER Project
(Parents Engaged in Education Reform)

PEER is a project of
the Federation for Children
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Boston, MA

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Texas A&M University

September 2000

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the Federation for Children with Special Needs
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Parents Engaged in Education Reform (PEER) is a national technical assistance project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. PEER's purpose is to support parents of children with disabilities and their organizations to be informed, active participants in education reform efforts. In addition, to enhance opportunities for early literacy in reading for at-risk students, PEER is providing information and training to parent and community organizations in promising and best practices in literacy.

The Federation for Children with Special Needs is a nonprofit organization based on the philosophy of parents helping parents. Founded in 1974 as a coalition of twelve disability and parent organizations, today the Federation is an independent advocacy organization committed to quality education and health care for all, and to protecting the rights of all children. To this end, the Federation provides information, support, and assistance to parents of children with disabilities, their organizations, their professional partners, and their communities.

For more information about the PEER Project or the Federation for Children with Special Needs, please contact the Federation's Central Office at:

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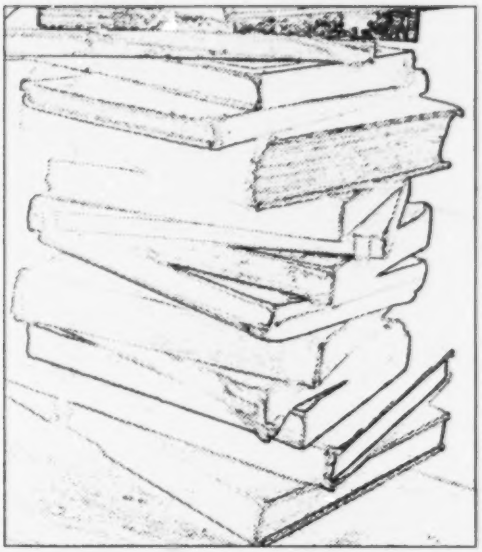
Systematic Phonics Instruction



Systematic Phonics Instruction is the second of a seven-part series of Resource Briefs that comprises *Teaching Students with Disabilities to Read: A PEER Resource Booklet.* Titles of Resource Briefs in this series of PEER Literacy Resource Briefs include:

Brief #1: Phonological Awareness

Brief #2: Systematic Phonics Instruction

Brief #3: Word Identification

Brief #4: Supported Passage Reading

Brief #5: Fluent Reading

Brief #6: Reading Comprehension

Brief #7: Early Intervention in Reading

Systematic Phonics Instruction is organized into these sections:

- General principles to keep in mind
- What is systematic phonics instruction?
- Why is it important?
- What can parents do?
- What can teachers do?
- Conclusion
- Resources
- References

General principles to keep in mind

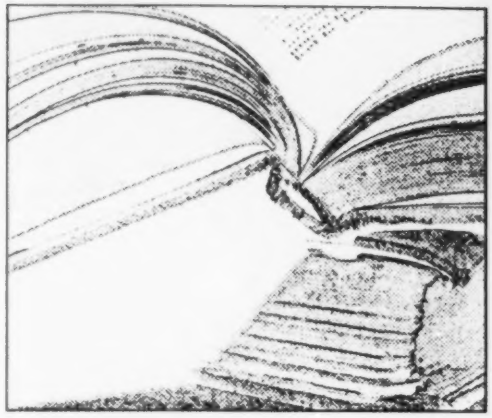
Reading is very important for success in our society, yet as many as one in five students has difficulty learning to read. Most students with learning disabilities, and many students with other types of disabilities, have problems in the areas of reading, writing, and spelling. This **Literacy Resource Brief** introduces parents and teachers to essential skill-building and teaching activities related to developing a child's use of phonics, or the ability to use the sounds of letters and letter groups to read words they do not know. Methods of teaching reading to students with disabilities described here have been shown to be particularly effective. Some of these methods are used in regular education classrooms for students who are just learning to read (Kindergarten through Grade 2), but they are still relevant and useful for students with disabilities of any age who have not learned to read well. Instructional materials should be selected with an eye toward age appropriateness.

The following key issues in reading instruction for students with disabilities are important regardless of the age or ability level of a student.

- Students with all types of disabilities have the *right* to quality reading instruction, whether they are in elementary, middle, or high school. Parents have the *right* to insist that the school provide instruction designed to help their children with disabilities improve their reading skills. These issues should be addressed in a student's Individualized Education Program (IEP).

- Reading programs for students with disabilities should be individually designed based on a student's strengths and needs. Parents and teachers should not make judgments about a student's ability to learn, or about the best way to teach him or her, based solely on a student's disabling condition or label. Every individual student's abilities, needs, and life situation must be carefully evaluated and considered in the IEP in order to design the best reading program for that student.

- Many students with disabilities may need modifications (changes) in the way they receive instruction, and in the way they fulfill class requirements in order to succeed in areas such as science, social studies, and language arts. These modifications are very important, but *they should not take the place of instruction* designed to help students with disabilities improve their reading skills.



Students with all types of disabilities have the *right* to quality reading instruction, whether they are in elementary, middle, or high school.

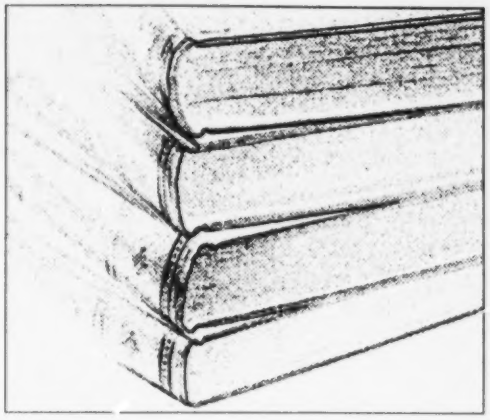
- Parents should, first and always, communicate with their child's teacher(s). Parents can simply ask their child's teacher(s) what can be done to help the child at home. Parents should also recognize themselves and be recognized as important sources of information about their child's interests, abilities, and learning styles. Coordination of school and home efforts is one of the best ways to help a student succeed. Strategies to ensure communication and coordination between school and home can be addressed in the student's IEP.

- The reading material used in reading instruction has to be "not too hard, not too easy," but at the right level for a student. Actual reading of real stories or other material should be part of a student's reading program.

- In the past, some people believed that certain methods of teaching reading were best for students with certain disabilities: that some methods were best for students with brain injury, that others were better for students with learning disabilities, and that still other methods were best for students with mental retardation. This is not the case. The success of a method of teaching reading depends on the content of the program, the way it is taught, the intensity of the instruction (how often and how actively it is taught), and the needs and strengths of the individual student.

- Although different methods of teaching reading may work equally well with students having various disabilities, students benefit when instruction is systematic and structured. Reading skills should be introduced in careful order, and students must be given a great deal of practice and repetition in each skill, so that they master each skill before new ones are introduced.

- **Note for second language learners:** Students who come to school unable to speak English should first be taught



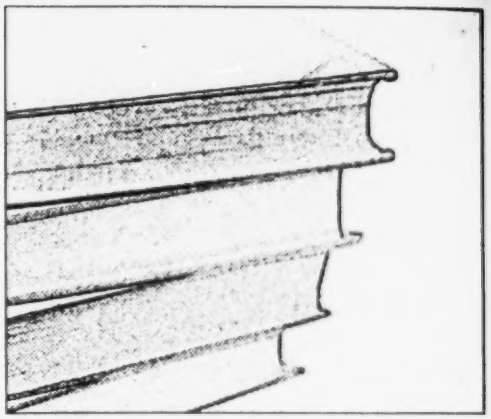
to read in their *native language.* Later, as they gain proficiency in spoken English, they should be taught to extend these skills to reading in English. This practice, however, is not possible in all school situations. Instructional materials may not be available in the child's native language, or there may not be a teacher who can speak and read in the child's native language. If students cannot speak English, and they cannot be taught to read in their native language, they should be given time to develop their proficiency in spoken English before they begin reading instruction. They need to learn English speech sounds and vocabulary. English reading instruction should begin *after* the student can speak English well enough to benefit from instruction.

Reference

Snow, C.E., Burns, M.S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.) (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children.* Washington D.C.: National Academy Press.

What is systematic phonics instruction?

Phonics instruction means teaching students how to use the sounds of letters and letter groups to read words they do not know. It means teaching the sounds of the letters and letter groups in order, *and* teaching how to use these sounds to read words. *Systematic* phonics instruction means teaching these things in a deliberate, organized way.



The success of phonics instruction depends in part on the student's level of phonological and phonemic awareness. (See **Brief #1: Phonological Awareness**). Students must become aware that speech is made up of separate sounds. Good phonics instruction includes activities designed to increase students' phonological awareness. Students must also understand the *alphabetic principle* that letters in words stand for certain sounds. Students must be able to recognize letters quickly and give their sounds. Although students can read without knowing the names of the letters, it is helpful for them to know letter names. Once they know some letters and sounds, students learn to use this knowledge to read words. They may "sound out" words by saying the sounds in them slowly and smoothly (saying "mmmaaattt—mat"), or they may say larger parts of words which are represented by groups of letters (saying "m—at, mat"). Parents and teachers should prompt students who are unable to speak to sound it out "in your head."

Good phonics instruction for students with disabilities should be clear and direct. It should be done every day. It should not be the student's entire reading program, but only a part of the reading program. It should focus on reading words. The goal of good phonics instruction is to enable students to read words quickly and automatically. It must allow the students to practice the skills they are learning by reading stories or articles. Students should spend from 20 to 30 minutes each day *actually reading* (see **Brief #4: Suported Passage Reading**).

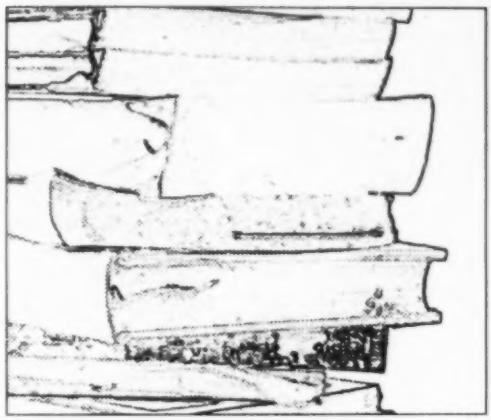
There are several different methods of teaching phonics in schools. In some methods, students are taught phonetic patterns only as they need them in their reading and writing. In other methods, students are purposefully and directly taught the skills needed to use phonics to read words. Totally individualized, one-on-one, reading tutoring programs such as the *Reading Recovery* program (see **Brief #7: Early Intervention in Reading**), taught by well-trained teachers, can be effective

in teaching phonics as needed while the student is reading and writing. Usually, though, more systematic and direct methods have been found to be most successful for students with disabilities.

One type of reading method that includes systematic phonics instruction is called Direct Instruction. Some examples of Direct Instruction reading programs are *Reading Mastery* and *Corrective Reading.* (See References, below.) In these methods, students learn easier skills before harder ones. They learn each letter's sound by itself and then learn to blend the sounds to read words. Students receive a lot of practice in the skills they are learning, and they receive immediate feedback from the teacher about their reading. These methods have been effective in teaching many students with disabilities to read.

Other methods often used with students with disabilities are based on the *Orton-Gillingham* approach to teaching reading and spelling. Some examples are the *Alphabetic Phonics* program and the *Slingerland* method. In these approaches, students learn letters and sounds through movement, speech, writing, and looking. For example, when a student learns a letter, he/she might trace the letter while saying its name and sound, write the letter in the air, then write it on paper and use the letter to read words and sentences.

Another way of teaching phonics that has been successful for students with disabilities is one in which students learn to read



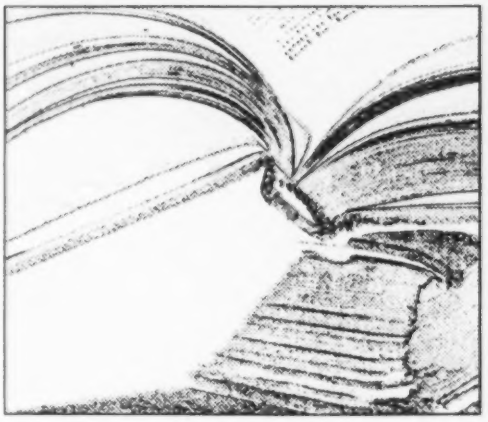
Good phonics instruction for students with disabilities should be clear and direct. It should be done every day. It should not be the student's entire reading program, but only a part of the reading program.

words they do not know by using word or word parts they *do* know. For example, if students know how to read "slide" and "nice," they can use this knowledge to help them read the word "slice." This method is used in *Reading Recovery* (see **Brief #7: Early Intervention in Reading**) and in the *Benchmark Word Identification Program.* In the *Benchmark* program, students learn a list of 120 key words that have common letter patterns. They learn 5 or 6 new words each week, and they are taught how to use the sounds in these words to read words they do not know.

One method of teaching the sounds of letters to students with significant disabilities or delays is to combine the letter with a picture that represents the sound of the letter. A commercial program that uses this approach is *Open Court.* (See Resources, below.) Students with significant cognitive delays have also learned to read using the *Distar Reading Program,* now sold under the name *Reading Mastery,* a method which breaks reading down into several skills and teaches each skill in a careful sequence. This and other reading methods which teach skills in this way are included in the Resources section.

Some computer programs can help students practice their phonics skills, but they should not take the place of good phonics instruction. Two approaches to teaching phonics that are not effective for students with disabilities are memorizing a lot of phonics rules and doing a lot of worksheets.

In one study by Heimann and others, students with autism increased their ability to read words, their phonological awareness, and their communication skills, through the use of an interactive computer program. (See References.) The program used in this study gave feedback to the students in many ways -- through voice, animation, video, and sign language. Students could read individual words, and they could create sentences with the words. Although computer-aided instruction holds promise for students



Some computer programs can help students practice their phonics skills, but they should not take the place of good phonics instruction.

with autism and other types of disabilities, it is important to remember that a computer program alone cannot be expected to solve all reading difficulties.

Why is it important?

Most students with disabilities who have reading problems have difficulty with phonemic awareness and phonics. Phonemic awareness training, as described in **Brief #1: Phonological Awareness,** and systematic phonics instruction, are two aspects of reading instruction that have been most successful for students with disabilities. For many students who are poor readers, particularly those with

learning disabilities and/or dyslexia, systematic phonics instruction is important simply because it works.

What can parents do?

- Ask your child's teacher whether systematic phonics instruction is included in your child's educational program. Ask whether your child is receiving phonics instruction every day using a well-organized, clear method of teaching.

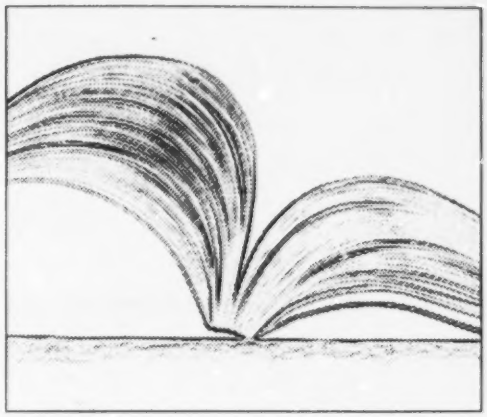
- Make sure that your child's IEP specifically addresses the need for systematic phonics instruction, if appropriate.

- If your child is in a phonics program at school, ask your teacher what you can do to help at home.

- Read A-B-C books to your child, if they are appropriate for your child's age.

- Have your child make letter books, if appropriate for the child's age. Begin with blank books with a letter on the front of each one. Help the child find or draw pictures of words that begin with that letter. Make a book for each sound the child has trouble with.

- Have your child try to say words that start with each letter of the alphabet. The child might try to think of a food that begins with "a," then one that begins with "b," etc. Even better, take



turns thinking of these words with your child.

- Have your child sort picture cards or objects that begin or end with the same letter.

- When your child is trying to sound out a word, have the child say it smoothly and slowly. Do not have the child chop the word apart and say each sound one at a time (like saying "m / a / t" for "mat"). Instead, encourage the child to say the word slowly and in a smooth, connected way, so that each sound can be heard ("mmmmaaaat, mat").

- Support your child as he or she tries to use phonics to read hard words in a story. If the word appears to be one the child could sound out, tell him or her to start the word, and then say it slowly, and think about what would make sense in the story. If the word is too difficult, tell the child the word.

What can teachers do?

- Teachers can be sure to include systematic phonics instruction in the reading program of students with disabilities, when appropriate. They can make use of published programs if these are of high quality. Phonics instruction for students with disabilities should be well-planned and well-organized and should have the following characteristics:

  (1) It should proceed from easier skills to more difficult skills, ensuring that the student masters each skill as the lessons progress.

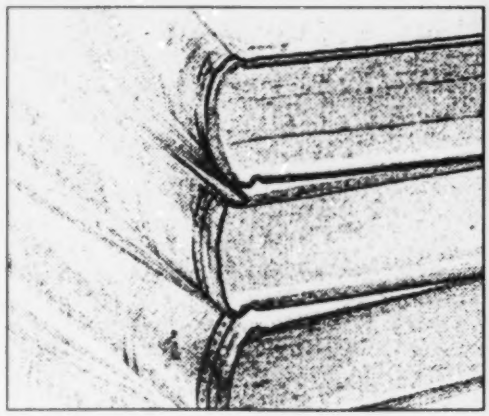
  (2) It should include many opportunities for practice, both of isolated skills and of real reading.

  (3) It should include immediate feedback when the student makes an error.

  (4) It should not *include large amounts of time on memorization of rules or on completion of worksheets.*

- Sounds of letters and letter groups should be taught directly. The teacher should model or demonstrate the sound, and the students should practice the sound.

- Teachers must be sure that they are pronouncing the letter sounds correctly themselves. It is very important that sounds such as /b/, /d/, and /k/ should not be pronounced with a short "u" sound after them. "B" does *not* say "bu." The habit of pronouncing letters with extra sounds can produce confusion in students.



- Teachers can be sure to teach students to sound out words in a smooth, connected way, as described above in "What Can Parents Do?"

Conclusion

With proper instruction and support, many more students than previously thought capable of reading can learn to read. Reading can open the door to success, enabling students to live fuller, more independent lives and to succeed in a variety of careers. This **PEER Literacy Resource Brief** has outlined some areas of critical concern in reading education for students with disabilities. When parents and teachers have access to the information they need, they are better equipped to make decisions about students' educational programs.

Resources

NOTE: These resources may be helpful to teachers and parents. They are listed here merely as options. The authors of this paper do not recommend any particular program, materials, or test.

Published Reading Programs Which Emphasize Systematic Phonics Instruction

Read Well: Critical Foundations in Primary Reading, by Sprick, Howard, and Fidanque. Published by Sopris West, (800) 547-6747.

Corrective Reading, by Engelmann, Haddox, Hanner, & Osborn, published by SRA, 220 East Danieldale Rd., DeSoto, TX 75115-2490, (800) 843-8855.

Open Court, published by SRA, 220 East Danieldale Rd., DeSoto, TX 75115-2490, (800) 843-8855.

Reading Mastery, by Engelmann & Bruner, published by SRA, 220 East Danieldale Rd., DeSoto, TX 75115-2490, (800) 843-8855.

The Slingerland Method, Educators Publishing Service, 31 Smith Place, Cambridge, MA 02138-1000, (800) 225-5750.

The Scottish Rite Method, Scottish Rite Hospital, (806) 747-3268.

Benchmark Word Identification/Vocabulary Development Program, 2107 N. Providence Rd., Media, PA 19063, (610) 565-3741; E-mail: gaskins@aol.com; www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec/ ieo/bibs/benchmrk.html.

Books

Phonics They Use, (1991) by Cunningham, published by Harper, Collins, ISBN: 0-673-46433-4.

Direct Instruction Reading (3rd Edition) by Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui. ISBN: 0-13-602566-8.

Word Matters, by Pinnell & Fountas, published by Heinemann, (800) 793-2154.

Other Resources

Cambridge Development Laboratory, Inc., 86 West St., Waltham, MA 02451, (800)637-0047, (781) 890-4640 (Special Education software).

The Neuhaus Education Center (with information about Alphabetic Phonics, teacher and parent workshops), (713) 664-7676, www.neuhaus.org.

The International Dyslexia Association (formerly known as the Orton Dyslexia Society), (410) 296-0232; www.interdys.org.

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